

Arjuna's Dilemma

Text by DANIEL B. HABER
Photographs by STEPHANIE BERGER

The Gita is the thematic center of a 70-minute chamber opera, melding modern jazz with traditional Indian music.

By a strange karmic coincidence, the Bhagavad Gita has cropped up in three avant-garde operas staged in New York City in the past year. The ancient text had first been used in 1980 as a libretto in Philip Glass' contemporary opera *Satyagraha*, based on Mohandas K. Gandhi's freedom struggles, and made its New York Metropolitan Opera debut in April 2008. Last fall, the Gita's Sanskrit verses also resonated in John Adams' *Dr. Atomic*—referencing Robert Oppenheimer's uttered quotation at the first atomic bomb test. In American composer Douglas J. Cuomo's *Arjuna's Dilemma*, however, it is the first time that the Gita itself has been made the thematic center of an entire opera, with Krishna and Arjuna its central characters.



Tony Boutté (left) as Arjuna
and John Kelly as Krishna
perform at the Harvey
Theater of the Brooklyn
Academy of Music.

After the last of three performances of *Arjuna's Dilemma* in November 2008, the full house audience of Asian Americans and other New Yorkers rose for a standing ovation at the Harvey Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music. A review in the November 7 *New York Times*, titled "Warrior Prince From India Wrestles With Destiny" called the opera "appealing and unabashedly eclectic." Opera Today Web site, which also praised the production, stated that "the grandeur of the presentation matches the grandeur of the conception."

For Cuomo, previously best known for his effervescent, salsa-like theme music for the HBO TV series *Sex and the City* (also used in the movie), the intimate 70-minute chamber opera is his most ambi-

"Arjuna's quest for knowledge—how to live, what a human being should fight for—is reflected for me personally not on the battlefield, but in daily, often mundane-seeming life. On my best days I'm able to think about what it means to aspire to the divine nature that is in each of us. At such times I struggle with the most basic questions of how one should be a human being in the world, and how to seek to lead a good life," he says.

The opera was scored for an Indian singer, a tenor and a female chorus, and 12 instrumentalists—string quintet, piano, two winds, two percussion, tabla and jazz saxophone. It blends North Indian performance styles and musical structures and patterns with Western instrumentation, harmonies and forms. Indian vocals

Krishna and Arjuna are known to Indian audiences as the central protagonists of the Bhagavad Gita—Arjuna as the warrior prince, and his dear companion, Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu, in the role of a charioteer. The Gita is the famous philosophical battlefield dialogue of the great mythological epic, Mahabharata, which relates the historic conflict between the rival clans, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. (Brooklyn Academy also hosted Peter Brook's nine-hour adaptation of the Mahabharata two decades ago.)

Despite being in the midst of the great battlefield of Kurukshetra, filled with thousands of warriors, in this production only Krishna and Arjuna are present on stage—on a raised platform, in full view above the brightly costumed musicians. Arjuna, as the title figure of the drama, is also the only one in full warrior's costume, grandly holding the elongated reins. Krishna is dressed in simple, almost contemporary costume.

Unbecoming his status as a noble prince, Arjuna, in a state of almost paralyzing confusion, drops his massive bow and falls to the ground. He must—but cannot, he fears—lead his army against an enemy that includes family, friends and teachers. Arjuna's dilemma is whether or not he should fight in this righteous battle against his kinsmen and elders. Unable to justify such violence against his own people, he turns for guidance to Krishna, who takes the opportunity to instruct him not only about duty, but the illusory nature of the visible world. As an oratorio concentrating more on the music than the visuals or action, the opera staging does not attempt to depict any of the traditional imagery associated with the climactic scene in which Krishna reveals his awesome universal form. Aside from the stirring music, the scope of the battlefield and any hint of the divinity of Krishna are left to the imagination.

So those in the audience looking for the typical mythological trappings and iconography well-known in the subcontinent might be disappointed by its conspicuous absence in this production. Vibhuti Patel, an Indian journalist based in New York who moderated a discussion with the composer at the Asia Society, commented that while she "enjoyed

mingling with a Western tenor and four-part choral singing. The Indian singer, tabla player and jazz saxophonist each use their respective traditions to reach for the ecstatic and the sublime. "The ecstatic nature of Indian singing led me to the idea of saxophone and improvising," Cuomo says. Although the work was originally inspired to utilize the talents of Indian musician Amit Chatterjee, who sings on the CD, the Brooklyn Academy performance directed by Robin Guarino featured Afghan vocalist Humayun Khan, who trained under Pakistani *qawwali* singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, as the voice of Krishna, and tenor Tony Boutté as Arjuna. Boutté also sang in *Satyagraha*.



Boutté (left) and Kelly (center) during their performance.

tious composition. Seamlessly melding modern jazz and traditional Indian musical forms, *Arjuna's Dilemma* explores ancient themes that remain startlingly topical: the conflicting claims of conscience and duty of a combatant in the time of war, and the search for self-knowledge in a changing world.

"The writing of *Arjuna's Dilemma* has allowed me to spend a lot of time thinking about profound philosophical questions, and to consider how to express these questions musically," Cuomo says in a statement on the audio CD of the opera.



Above: Chorus members Anita Johnson (from left), Bora Yoon, Kirsten Sollek, Suzan Hansen and Barbara Rearick.

Cuomo's blend of jazz and Indian classical music, Tony Boutté's fine singing in the role of Arjuna and Badal Roy's virtuosic tabla playing," she was "less thrilled" with the production.

If some audience members were disappointed at the lack of epic spectacle or by the mundane depiction of Krishna, we are reminded that in this chamber production it is the interior mental struggle that is stressed. As musicologist John Schaefer writes in the CD album notes, "the story of *Arjuna's Dilemma* may unfold on a grand, mythic stage; it may encompass grand concepts of faith, duty and the nature of the universe; but it is essentially

an internal story—a story about, and taking place in, a single consciousness." Hence, although dubbed a chamber opera or oratorio, it is really, as Schaefer points out, basically a solo or a monodrama. He says, "All the voices, despite the characters they're associated with...are ultimately within Arjuna's own mind..."

Regarding the structure, as Schaefer says in the notes, the opera is composed in a familiar Western form of three acts: The Dilemma, The Answer, and The Vision, but begins, Indian style, with the slow unfolding of the material as in a raga performance. The work ends with a recasting of the opening material, an invocation of the many names of Krishna. The effect, as Schaefer suggests, is like the ritual chanting of the names of the divinity common to many Indian mystical devotional schools.

In commenting about his journey from the seemingly profane, *Sex and the City*, to the sublime, *Arjuna's Dilemma*, Cuomo told SPAN in an interview that what he learned from the Gita is that one must perform one's duty, which in his case is writing music. He says that the Gita influenced "the way that I see myself in the world—and the idea of doing right action

without making any claim to the fruits of action. It changed and enriched my ways of looking at the world and my interaction with others." And he hoped that the opera would also influence others.

"For me, being in the world includes writing music, and so one of the questions I face is how to write music that reflects these aspirations and struggles," Cuomo said in the CD statement. "I think that beauty and art can reference the unknowable: what is seen and felt but often beyond expression. The Bhagavad Gita holds many moments in which one experiences this ineffable sense of the world, and an individual's place in things. My desire in writing *Arjuna's Dilemma* has been to convey some sense of that wonder, fear, vastness and hope."

In his review in Opera Today, music critic John Yohalem writes that *Arjuna's Dilemma* is "a modern opera, a tale told through singing." Harking back to the oral tradition of ancient traditional cultures such as the Vedic, the Gita and the opera that it inspired, is after all, a song.

Daniel B. Haber is a freelance writer and native New Yorker who divides his time between New York and South Asia.